DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 328 915 CS 212 651

AUTHOR Caswell, Donald
TITLE Eight Simple Secrets to More Persuasive Writing.
PUB DATE Dec 90
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Vocational Association (Cincinnati, OH, November 30-December 4, 1990).
AVAILABLE FROM Donald Caswell, 2022 E. Forest Dr., Tallahassee, FL 32303 ($1.00 each, 25 for $5.00).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Instructional Materials (For Learner) (051)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Response; *Persuasive Discourse; Writing Evaluation; *Writing Improvement; *Writing Skills; *Writing Strategies
IDENTIFIERS Power; Professional Writing; Writing Contexts; *Writing Style

ABSTRACT

The goal of persuasive writing is to move the reader to action or to get the reader to refrain from action, and most of the secrets of persuasion can work either way. To get readers to take action, a writer has to appeal to the emotions as much as possible. To get readers to refrain from action, a writer must appeal to the intellect. The secrets include: (1) write to express, not impress; (2) simplify, simplify, simplify; (3) use short sentences; (4) appeal to the senses; (5) use action verbs and active voice; (6) keep subject and verb close together; (7) pay attention to sounds; and (8) calculate the percentage of power words to nonpower words. Power words improve the effectiveness of writing. (A chart listing power and nonpower words and a sample calculation of a power index is included.) (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED328915

Caswell's Workshop Newsletter

AVA Edition
DECEMBER, 1990

Donald Caswell

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Donald Caswell

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

EIGHT SIMPLE SECRETS TO MORE PERSUASIVE WRITING

The only question, for me, is how do I move the reader?

Whether I move the reader to action or convince the reader he should sit still, I have altered his normal course of affairs; therefore, I have moved him.

Quite often the intended result of a given piece of persuasive writing is that the reader take no action at all.

The first thing you need to identify, as a writer seeking to persuade an audience, is whether you intend to move that audience from its complacent state to action, or whether you hope to slow down a movement you do not like.

Most of the secrets of persuasion can work either way, but you must know what you're trying to accomplish so that you can apply the correct aspect of the technique.

The explanations and examples given here are intended to help you accomplish either goal. But it is important that you remember which goal you've set. Once you've convinced a large group of people that they need to make a significant change, it's difficult to ask them to sit down and be quiet and let you run the show.

Likewise, once you've convinced your audience that everything is okay, it's tough to make them move themselves to do the work necessary to solve any problems you might have overlooked when you had your rose-colored glasses on.

CS212651

copyright 1990 Donald Caswell

TO GET THE READER TO TAKE ACTION:

You have to stimulate him. Get him riled up. Appeal to emotions as much as possible--anger, compassion, fear.

Although your argument will appeal to the intellect, the thrust of it should be designed to make your reader feel some emotion very strongly.

TO GET YOUR READER TO REFRAIN FROM ACTION:

You must appeal to the intellect, to the need for moderation and reflection. You can use emotive language when it helps, but mainly appeal to the mind.

THESE SECRETS WORK NO MATTER WHAT YOU WANT TO SELL

1. **WRITE TO EXPRESS, NOT IMPRESS.** Don't try to "sound" the way you think a good writer should sound. Instead, use all your energy simply to get your point across as clearly as possible IN YOUR OWN WORDS. Tell what moves you. Say it your own way.

2. **SIMPLIFY, SIMPLIFY, SIMPLIFY.** Use simple subjects, simple verbs, simple words, and simple sentences. Complex sentences confuse the reader. Complex words distance you from your reader. Complex subjects and verbs move the reader in more than one direction at a time. We want the reader to understand everything we say, empathize with us, and move in only one direction--our direction. Keep everything simple.

3. **USE SHORT SENTENCES.** Long sentences contain many ideas, diffusing the impact. Short sentences cut right to the bone, stimulating emotional response. For example, which statement makes you madder? 1) In view of the current situation involving your status as an employee at this institution, your services no longer appear to be required, so we would appreciate your removing your personal belongings from your desk and leaving. 2) You're fired. Pack up and get out.

4. **APPEAL TO THE SENSES.** Readers need to SEE your point, so use words that paint a picture. "We need a new facility because the present one is too small; rooms designed for 20 students now hold 35" makes a good straight intellectual argument. Adding "Presently classrooms are so crowded that students must climb over other students' desks in order to get to theirs, because desks are so close together, and the teacher must lecture from her desk because there is no room at the front of the class" makes a visual statement that the reader can SEE. SEEING is BELIEVING. Other senses--HEARING, FEELING, TASTE--also excite the emotions and allow the reader to EXPERIENCE what you've gone through in order to reach your conclusions.

5. **USE ACTION VERBS and ACTIVE VOICE. ACTION VERBS** show a person actually doing something. The sentence "Herb Smith is the board member who proposed the new facility" merely identifies Herb, using the verb "is." The action verb in the following sentence makes a more powerful message: "Herb Smith spearheaded the drive to build the new school." **ACTIVE VOICE** emphasizes the ACTION and the DOER of the ACTION. PASSIVE VOICE emphasizes the object of the action. Here's the difference. ACTIVE VOICE: "Herb spearheaded the drive." PASSIVE: "The drive was spearheaded by Herb." Herb and his spearheading are what's important; emphasize them. The drive did nothing.

6. **KEEP SUBJECT AND VERB CLOSE TOGETHER.** When you separate them, you dilute the impact of your main point. Compare: 1) "Vocational educators, who are often forgotten by legislators when educational budgets are discussed, will determine America's Future." 2) "Vocational educators will determine America's future. Yet legislatures often forget about them when they discuss budgets.

7. **PAY ATTENTION TO SOUNDS.** Here's the genius of the poet talking. Face it: words that are difficult to pronounce are also difficult to read. Why make anything difficult for your reader? Cut out all words that you yourself can't pronounce comfortably. For some special refinements, look at the letters that predominate in your words. Hard consonant sounds (b, d, g t) slow down the pace. Soft sounds make the pace move smoothly. Most people like mellow music. Give it to them when you can. Avoid hard consonants.

8. **CALCULATE THE PERCENTAGE OF POWER WORDS** TO NONPOWER WORDS in your writing. Strive for a POWER WORD PERCENTAGE of 50%.

Many people think powerful writing is an art and cannot be taught or measured or duplicated. To some extent, they're correct.

But to a much greater extent, they're dead wrong. Methods for powerful writing can be LEARNED, therefore they can be taught. Powerful writing can be duplicated--the world is full of examples.

And the Power Index, developed by Dr. Larry Gross, Tallahassee, Florida, is a somewhat accurate measure of the power of your writing. More important, it gets you to look for Power Words in your writing. Using Power Words throughout your writing, you will improve the effectiveness of what you have to say.

Calculate your POWER INDEX

1. Count the words in a passage.
2. Count the number of POWER words.
3. Divide the number of POWER words by the total words in the passage and multiply the result by 100.
4. This final number is the passage's Power Index, or PI.

Example: Total words = 147. Total power words = 64.
64 divided by 147 = .44 .44 X 100 = 44
The PI for this passage is 44.

Use the convenient chart given on the next page to calculate the PI for your own writing. Here is a good example of how the POWER INDEX works to help you improve your writing.

TAKE THIS SAMPLE OF PROSE:

"The chimney I am studying is made of bricks and mortar. The bricks, once bright red and strong, are now faded with age and sunlight, and have turned orange with yellow and white patches running through them. The mortar has turned grey from ashes being swept into the wind and then smudged into the rough cement.

"The bricks are crumbling, and at the edges of the very top of the chimney, they are charred tar black from the many fires built within. There is much dirt and grime gathered on the ledge of the chimney's surface, and I can write my name in it since it's so thick.

"The chimney is solid and massive in spite of its age."

A quick calculation shows this passage to have a PI of 40. (48 POWER words divided by 119 nonpower words, times 100.)

NOW LOOK AT THIS REWRITE OF THE SAME PASSAGE

"Age and sunlight have faded the chimney's bricks, once red and strong, and turned them orange with yellow and white patches. Wind-swept ashes have smudged the rough cement and turned the mortar grey.

"Crumbling bricks at the chimney's top edge are charred tar black. I can write my name in the thick dirt and grime gathered on the ledge of the chimney's surface.

"The chimney stands solid and massive despite its age."

For additional copies of this publication or to arrange for a writing consultation, contact:

Donald Caswell
2022 East Forest Drive
Tallahassee, FL 32303
(904) 386-5508

The PI for this passage is 55 (40/73). What's more, the passage has become more vibrant, more active. The original passage contains many good sensual stimuli (an important aspect of good writing), but it moves too slowly. The scene is very slowly being painted before you. As readers, we appreciate the painting, the deliberate strokes the writer takes to make us see every aspect of the object in question, but we also become tired by the slow pace.

In the rewritten passage, we have lost none of the imagery--colors, sunlight, ashes, dust, age and decay. What we've gained is immediacy. The images flood us, rather than wafting down on us. NOTE that this improvement comes from reducing the total number of words in the passage, not from adding more POWER words. In writing, shorter is usually better.

POWER WORDS	NONPOWER WORDS
ALL nouns, including proper nouns	pronouns
Most verbs	any form of the verb "to be"
	auxiliary (helping) verbs
	e.g., "has been going" counts as 1 power word, not three
Adjectives and Adverbs made from nouns or verbs -- e.g., "rocky" comes from the noun "rocky"; "hesitantly" comes from the verb "to hesitate"	Adjectives and adverbs which do not come from nouns or verbs -- e.g., "very", "probably," "small"
Colors	Prepositions, e.g., "on" "of"
Numbers (except the word "one" used as a pronoun)	Conjunctions, articles, interjections
Adjectives that can be seen, felt, heard, or tasted, e.g., "triangular" (seen), "rough" (felt), "crackling" (heard), "salty" (tasted)	General and vague adjectives, e.g., "bright", "large", "noisy"
Similes and metaphors, e.g., "like steel"	